ELDEN RING THEMES & INFLUENCES - PT 1 - NORSE MYTHOLOGY

Posted 26 February 2022
By Richmond Lee

I ween that I hung | on the windy tree,
Hung there for nights full nine;
With the spear I was wounded, | and offered I was
To Othin, myself to myself,
On the tree that none | may ever know
What root beneath it runs.

None made me happy | with loaf or horn,
And there below I looked;
I took up the runes, | shrieking I took them,
And forthwith back I fell.

Hovamol. 139-140

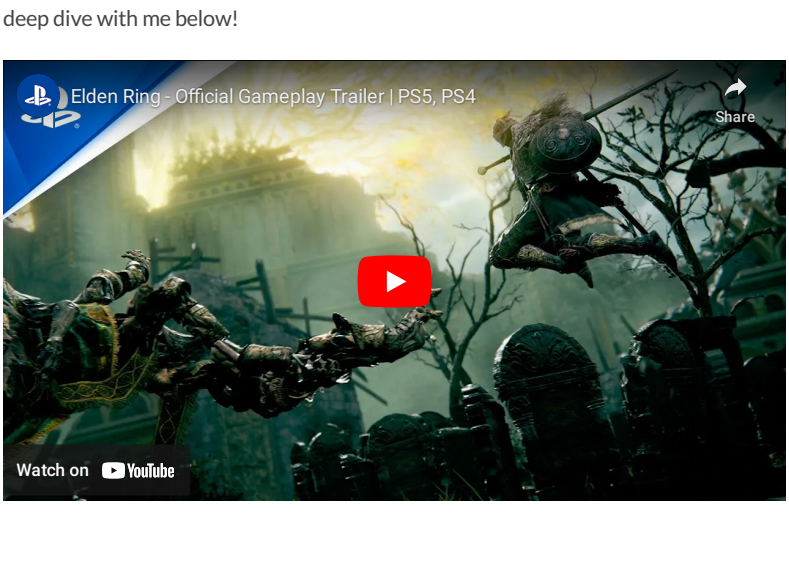
Hello, dear reader. You may sometimes hear me refer to myself as the world's slowest writer. Please know, and I apologize for this, that I don't say that entirely in jest. You see, I've been working on an analysis of the *Elden Ring* Gameplay Reveal Trailer since June of 2021. It's April 2022 as I'm writing this. The game has been out for weeks. Millions have beaten it. And I'm still not done with my analysis of the first trailer! So instead of spending even more time refining it, I'm just gonna have to bite the bullet and wrap it up as best as I can!

Please keep in mind this isn't an analysis of the game itself. I've yet to play it, and I haven't looked up much related to the game beyond this reveal trailer because I was so stubbornly set on analyzing it on its own merits without any further information. So what's the point of even writing this now that the game's out?

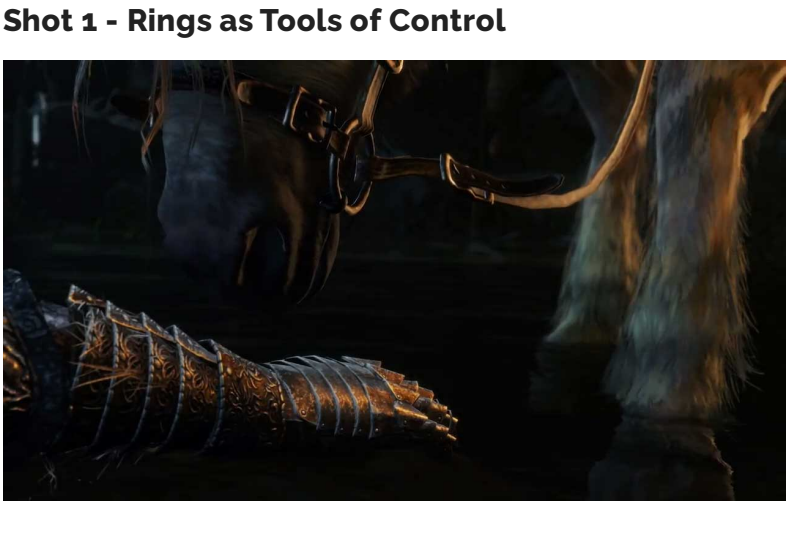
- I've already put dozens of hours into researching and writing this, so it's too late for me to turn back now!
- this article is a testament to From Software's expert ability to craft compelling worlds with clear themes and meaningful mythic allusions. Because their storytelling through world building is so ROCK SOLID you can gleam an incredible amount of information from a short, but very well made trailer.

So here goes!

Here's the trailer in question from June 11, 2021. Please watch this first, then take a deep dive with me below!

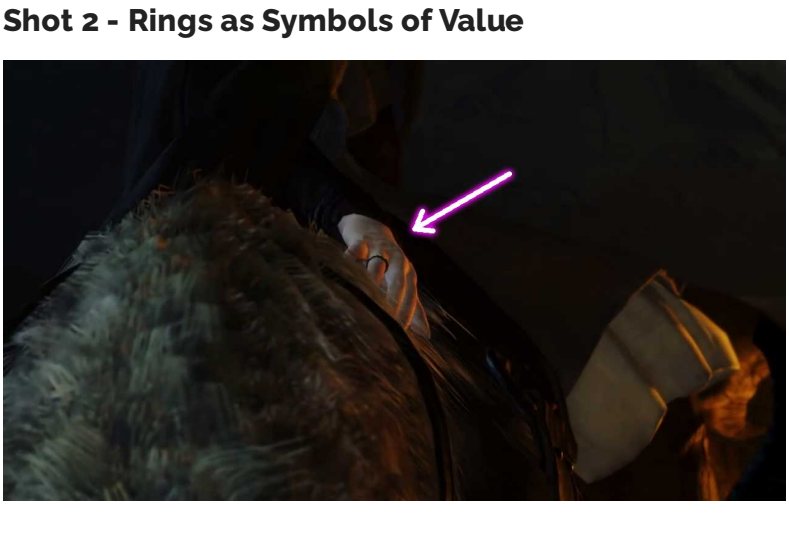


Shot 1 - Rings as Tools of Control



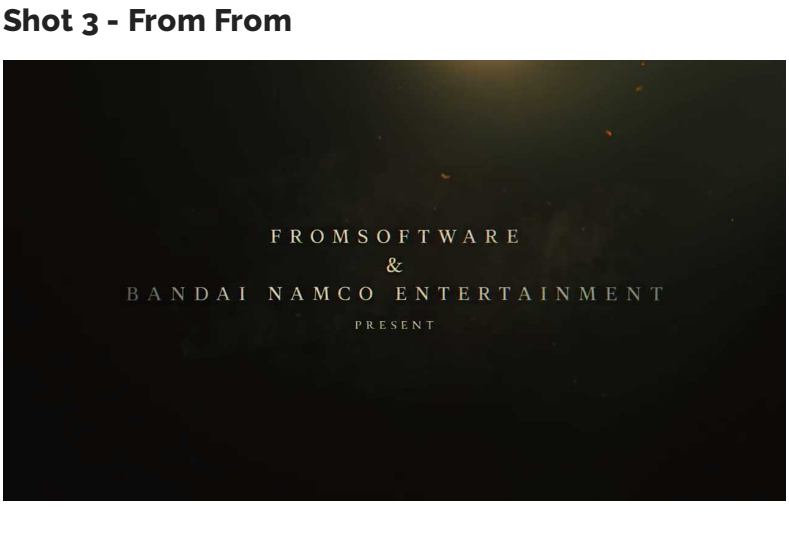
The trailer begins with the player laying face down in a shallow puddle of water. You can only see their gauntleted (and ringless) right hand as a pony (a beast of burden) bends down to sniff at our hero (who is currently situated below the work animal). There's already some foreshadowing here. Remember the game is called "Elden Ring" and the first thing we see is a large ring on the horse's muzzle. The ring allows the rider to reign the horse and control it.

Shot 2 - Rings as Symbols of Value



There's a woman sitting atop the horse. You can't see her face (this is a big motif throughout this trailer) but she's well dressed and seated comfortably. She strokes the horse's mane to put it at ease. She wears a ring on the ring finger of her right hand. In contrast to the ring on the horse, this ring is decorative and reflects wealth and status. In many cultures, the placement of her ring also denotes marriage. This is obviously an important ring.

Shot 3 - From From



Neat to see how the developer, From Software gets top billing above the publisher, Bandai Namco

Shot 4 - Salvation?

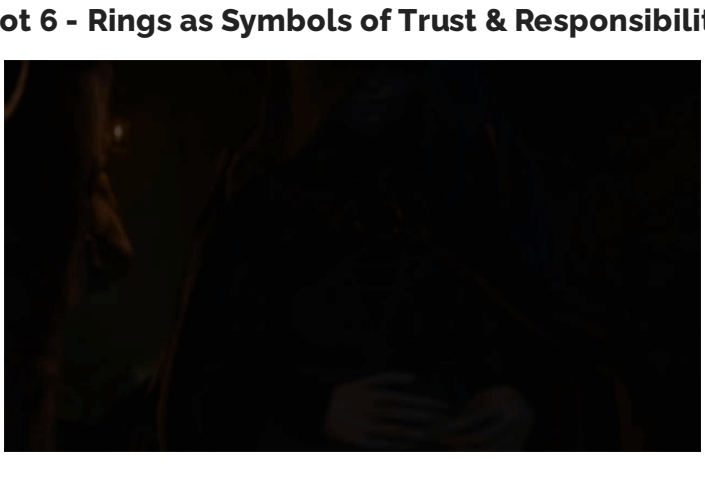
We see from the player character's POV. Their vision is blurry. They are clearly injured. The woman dismounts and approaches them.

Shot 5 - Titans of Modern Fantasy

A NEW WORLD CREATED BY
HIDETAKA MIYAZAKI
&
GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

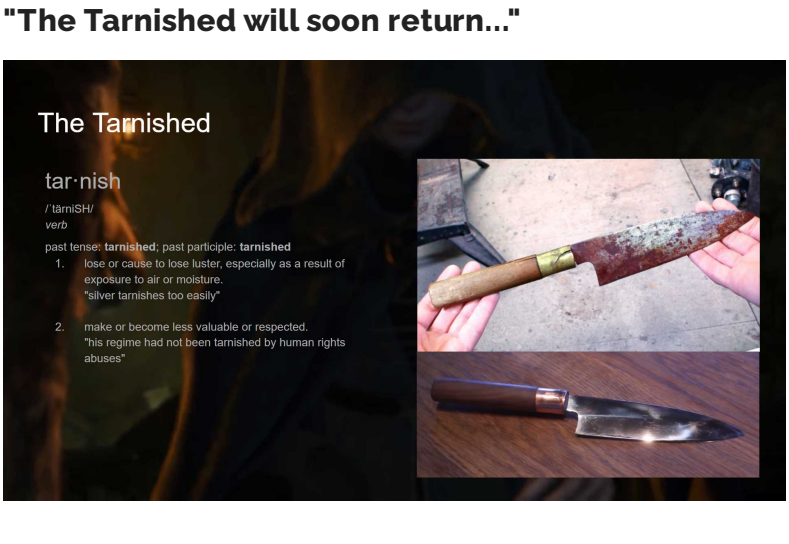
Amazing to see Hidetaka Miyazaki get equal billing with George R.R. Martin!

Shot 6 - Rings as Symbols of Trust & Responsibility



The woman removes her ring (the Elden Ring?) and it seems she's about to place it on the player character's hand, evoking possible matrimonial symbolism for the ring and her connection to the player. The voiceover begins:

"The Tarnished will soon return..."



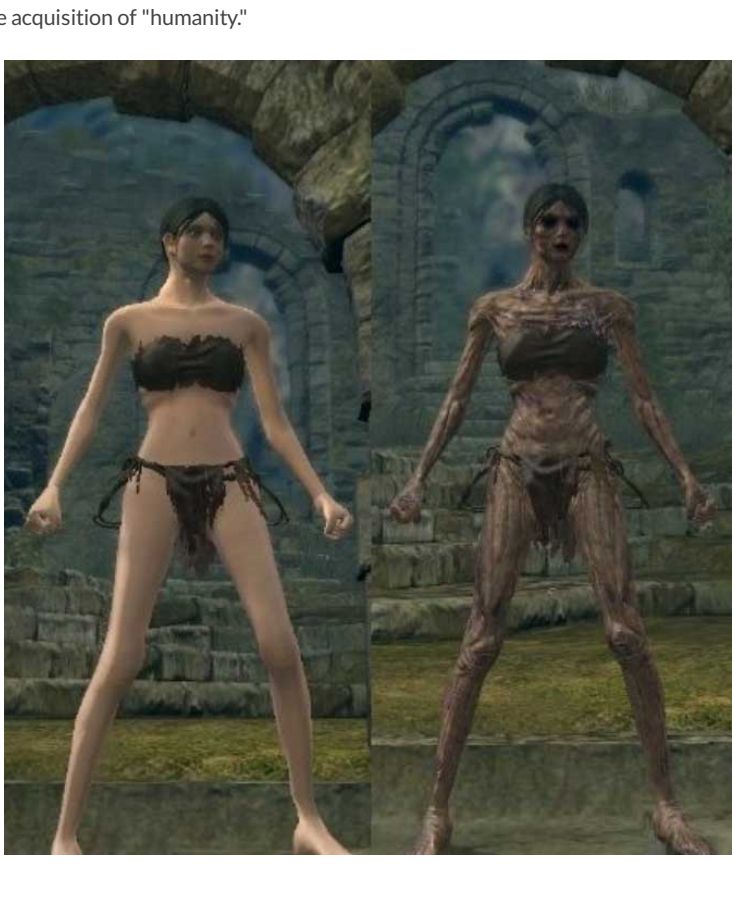
The Tarnished

tar·nish
verb
past tense: tarnished; past participle: tarnished
1. lose or cause to lose luster, especially as a result of exposure to air or moisture.
"silver tarnishes too easily"
2. make or become less valuable or respected.
"his regime had not been tarnished by human rights abuses"

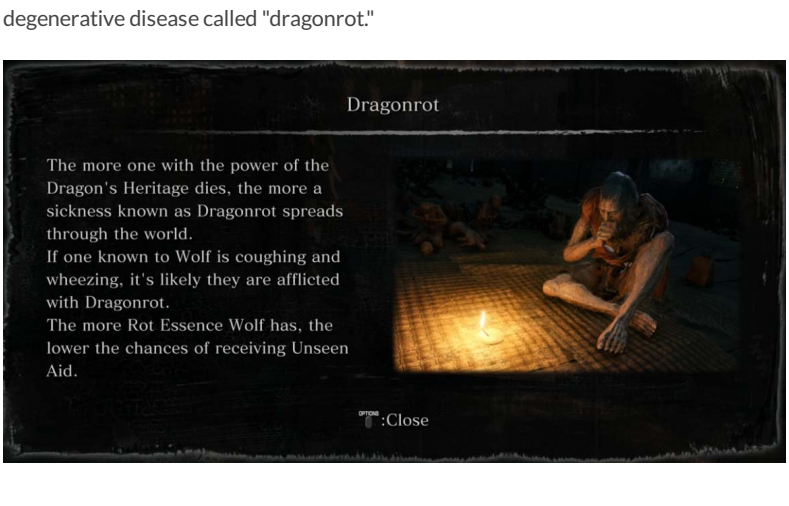
The word "tarnished" describes when something is exposed to the elements and loses its luster.

It also describes when something (or someone) becomes less valuable or respected. The concept of tarnishing is a strong theme throughout the various "Souls" and "Souls-like" games.

In Dark Souls, the main character is Undead and undergoes a "hollowing" process every time they die/lose and then revive/continue. This state can be reversed with the acquisition of "humanity."



In Sekiro, when the main character revives from death he afflicts his allies with a degenerative disease called "dragonrot."

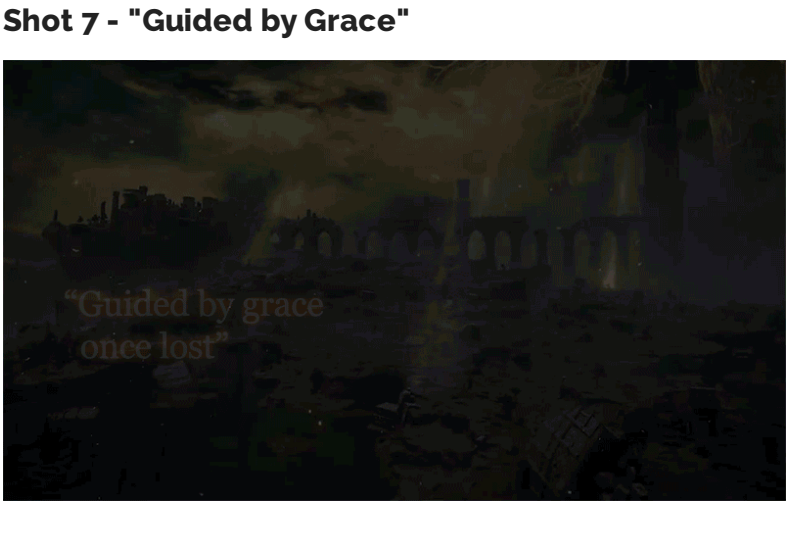


Dragonrot

The more one with the power of the Dragon's Heritage dies, the more a sickness known as Dragonrot spreads through the world.
If one known to Wolf is coughing and wheezing, it's likely they are afflicted with Dragonrot.
The more Rot Essence Wolf has, the lower the chances of receiving Unseen Aid.

In *Elden Ring*, it's clear that the player character belongs to a group of people known as "the Tarnished" who will likely suffer from some similar affliction.

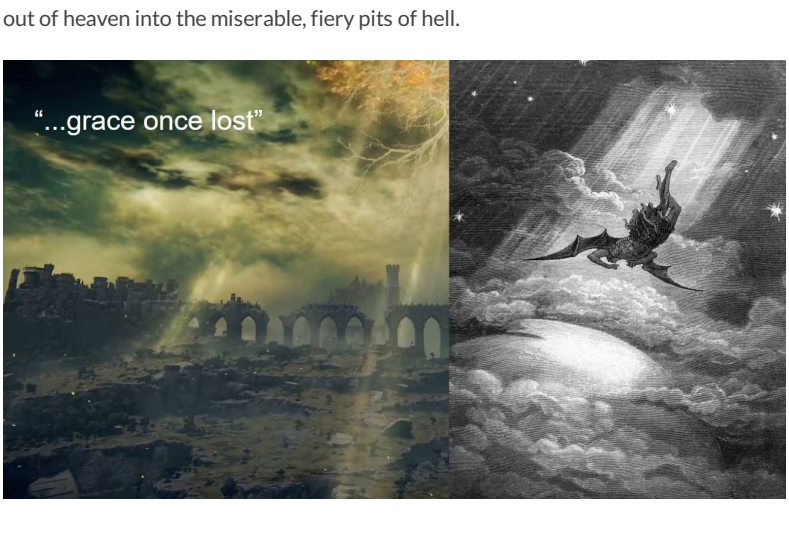
Shot 7 - "Guided by Grace"



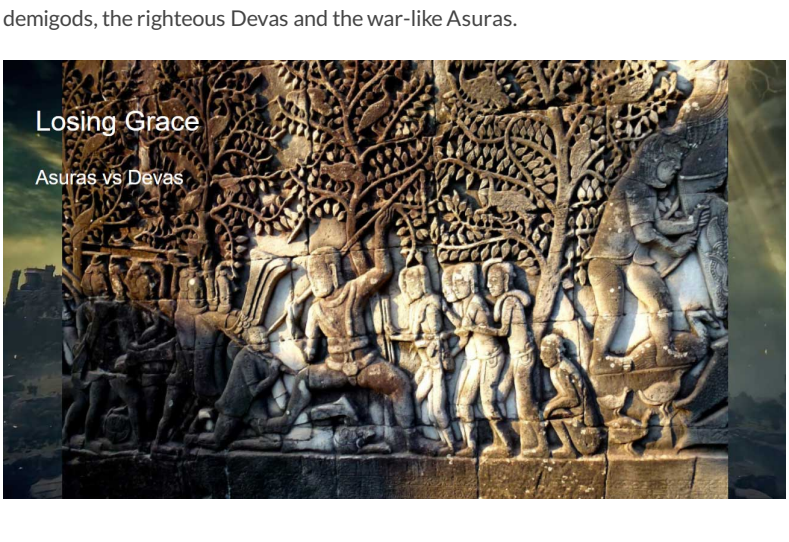
The narration continues, saying that the Tarnished will be "guided by grace, once lost" as we are shown this colossal glowing tree that will most certainly prove to be key to the game's lore. It recalls various "world trees" of different cultures, particularly Yggrasil--more on this later!

In religious terms, "grace" usually refers to the Divine Will. Being in a state of grace means acting according with that divine will, being possessed by it as it drives you to salvation.

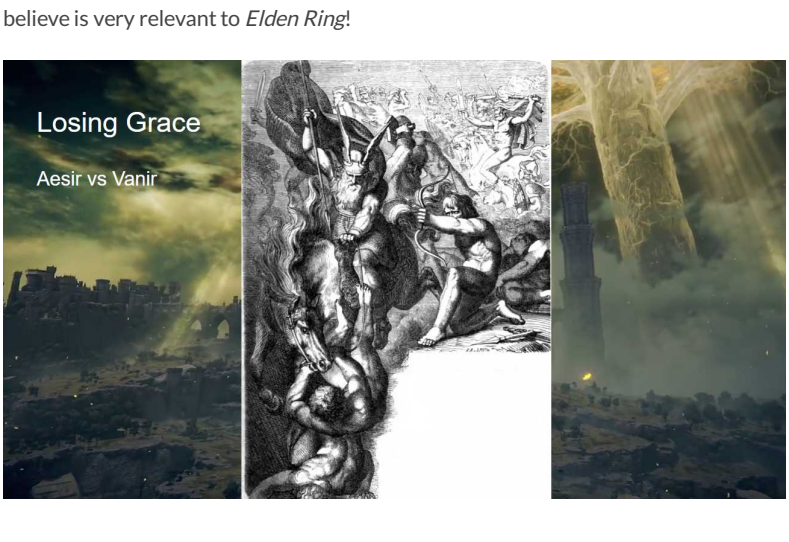
Losing grace is a very serious affair. According to Christianity, the angel Lucifer famously rebelled against God and fell from grace. He and his legions were then cast out of heaven into the miserable, fiery pits of hell.



In the ancient texts of The Vedas (that formed the foundation of Hinduism and later trickled down into Buddhism) there was a great battle between two groups of demigods, the righteous Devas and the war-like Asuras.



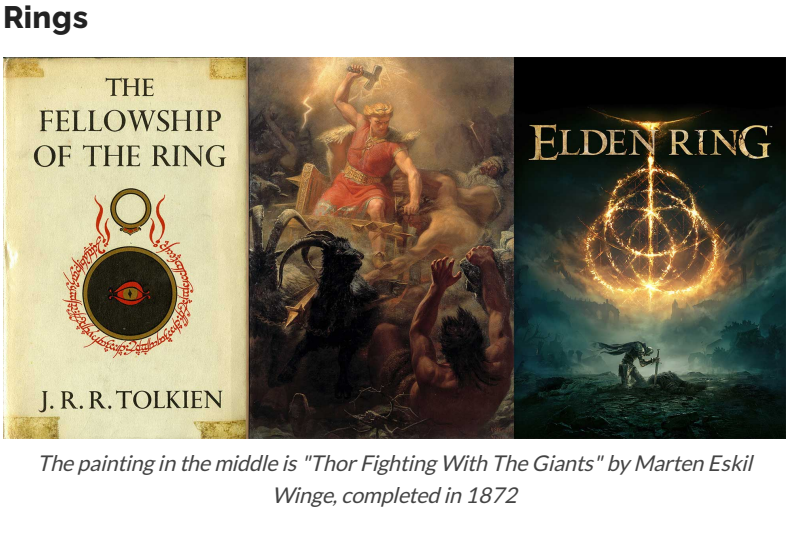
Some scholars speculate that these stories may have inspired later legends about the war between the Norse gods, the Aesir (Asuras) and Vanir (Devas), which I believe is very relevant to *Elden Ring*!



First off the name "Elden Ring" immediately recalls JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, one of the cornerstones of modern Fantasy. It's a given that Tolkien was a huge influence on both Hidetaki Miyazaki and George RR Martin. But *Elden Ring* goes deeper, tapping into one of the major inspirations on *Lord of the Rings*:

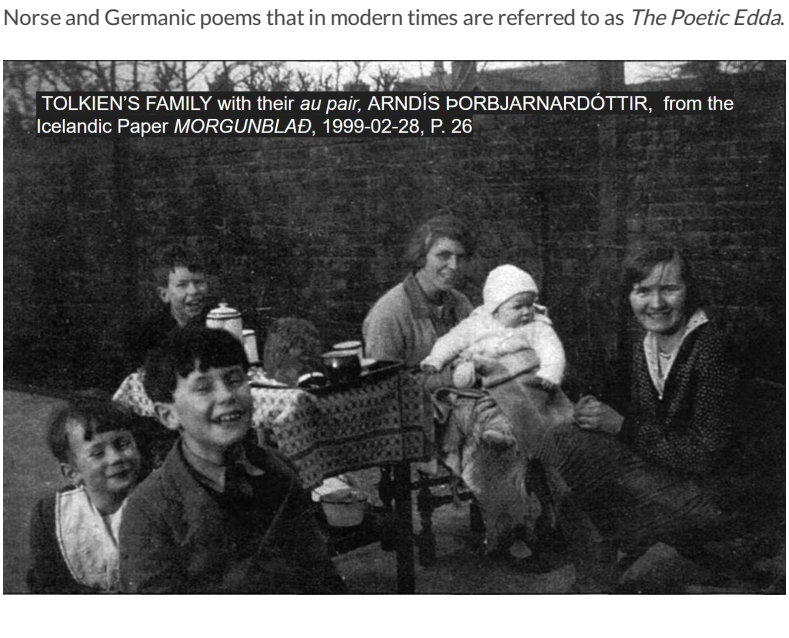
Norse mythology!

The Norse Inspirations behind The Lord of the Rings


THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING
J. R. R. TOLKIEN
ELDEN RING

The painting in the middle is "Thor Fighting With The Giants" by Marten Eskil Winge, completed in 1872

When creating his Middle Earth setting, Tolkien was hugely inspired by ancient Icelandic epic poetry and folklore, which account for much of what we refer to as Norse mythology today. Many assume that Tolkien was inspired by Richard Wagner's epic 4-part opera *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* (1857), often referred to as *The Ring Cycle*, in which the old Northern European gods vie for control of a magical ring that grants dominion over all creation. Tolkien himself denied this influence, instead asserting that he and Wagner were drawing upon the same source, old Norse and Germanic poems that in modern times are referred to as *The Poetic Edda*.

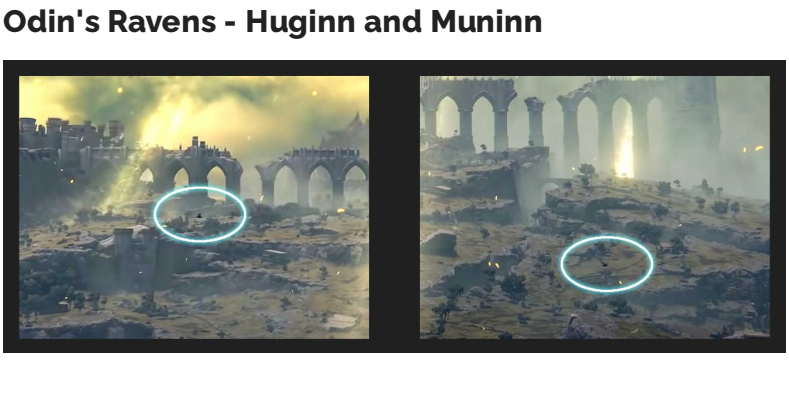


TOLKIEN'S FAMILY with their *au pair*, ARNDÍS ÞORBJARNARDÓTTIR, from the Icelandic Paper *MORGUNBLAÐ*, 1999-02-28, P. 26

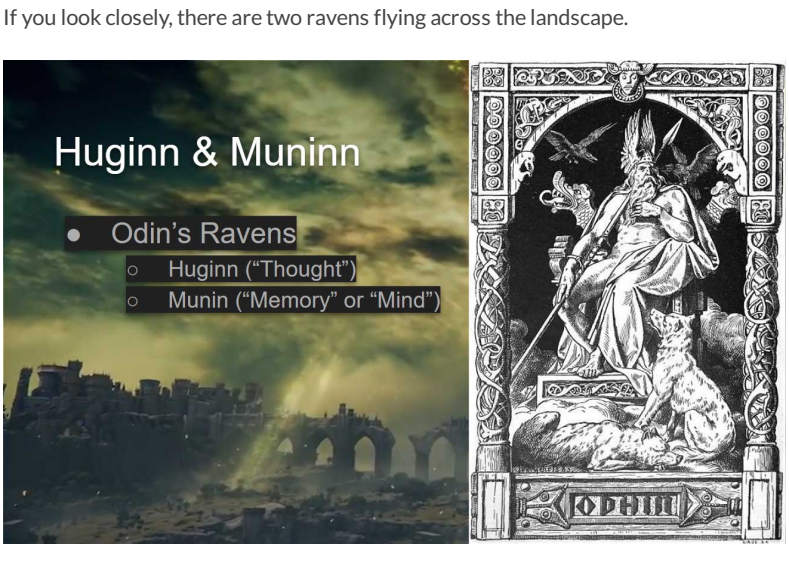
Tolkien's claim is easily corroborated. In the late 1920s, the Tolkien family had an au pair named Arndís Þorbjarnardóttir, who was from Iceland. Arndís got along very well with Tolkien and his children. She would regale them with tales from Icelandic folklore and she tutored Tolkien in the Icelandic language, which allowed him to dive deeper into *The Poetic Eddas* that would go on to inspire so much of his work. This is how hardcore Tolkien was about his research! Rather than waiting for someone to translate *The Poetic Eddas* (the root of just about everything we know about Norse mythology today) into English, he hired a nanny to live with his family and teach him Icelandic so he could read the Eddas in their original language! (note: after learning modern Icelandic, he still had to learn ancient Icelandic to read the Eddas!)

So that's all fine and well, but what does that have to do with *Elden Ring*? Read on and you'll see there are tons of parallels to Norse mythology in this trailer!

Odin's Ravens - Huginn and Muninn



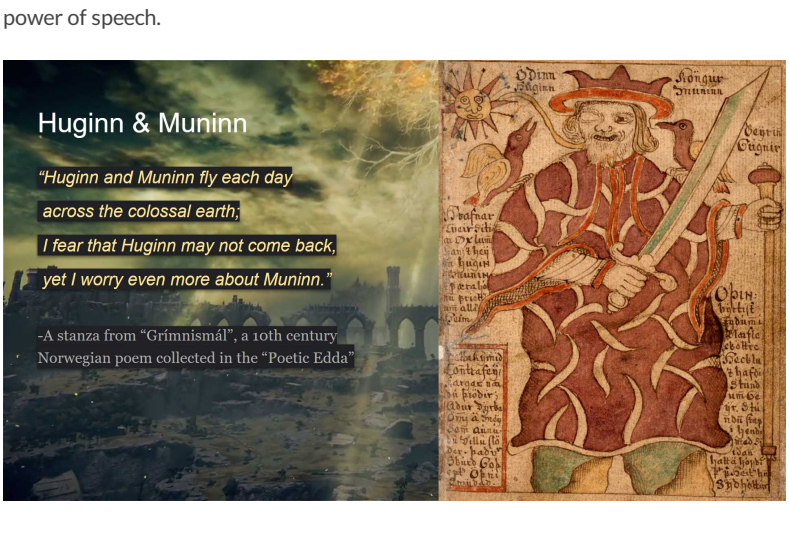
When the giant glowing World Tree is introduced, you can hear the cawing of ravens. If you look closely, there are two ravens flying across the landscape.



Huginn & Muninn

- Odin's Ravens
  - Huginn ("Thought")
  - Munin ("Memory" or "Mind")

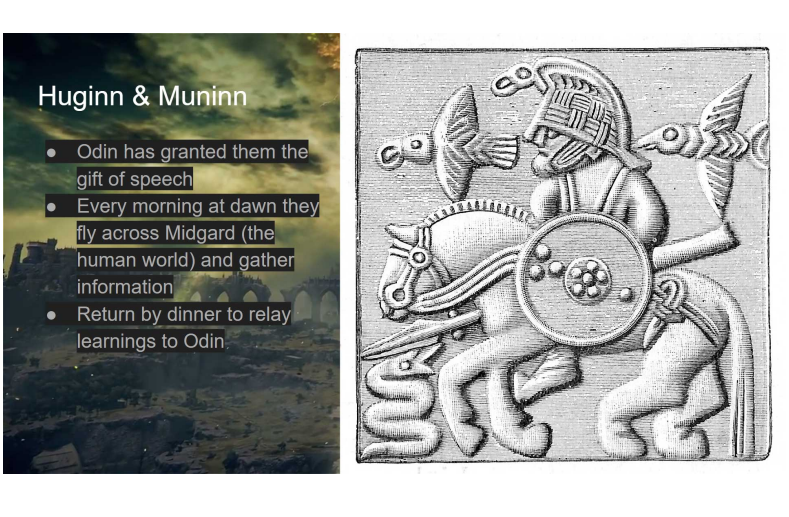
In Norse mythology, Odin (the king of Asgard and ruler of the gods according to *The Prose Edda*) has two ravens named Huginn and Muninn who he has gifted with the power of speech.



Huginn & Muninn

"Huginn and Muninn fly each day
across the colossal earth.
I fear that Huginn may not come back,
yet I worry even more about Muninn."

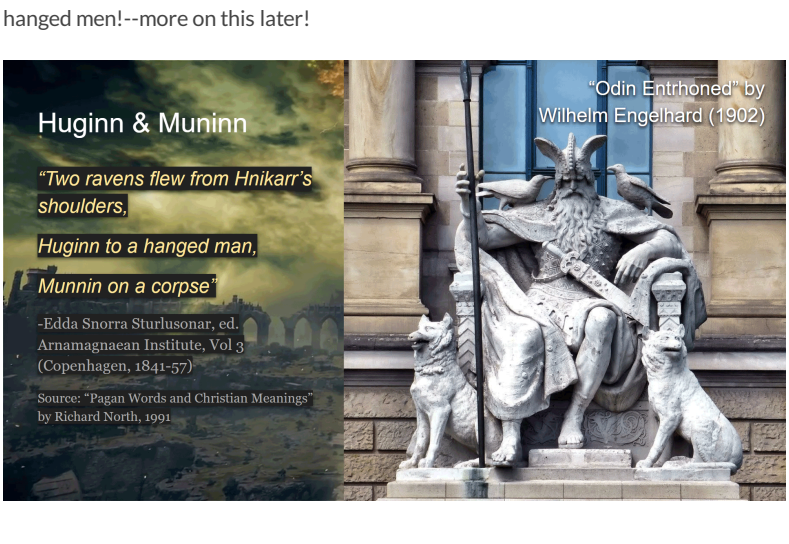
-A stanza from "Grímnismál", a 10th century Norwegian poem collected in the "Poetic Edda"



Huginn & Muninn

- Odin has granted them the gift of speech
- Every morning at dawn they fly across Midgard (the human world) and gather information
- Return by dinner to relay learnings to Odin

Every day at dawn they fly across Midgard (the known world, inhabited by humans) and gather information. They're known to even talk to the dead, particularly favoring hanged men!--more on this later!



Huginn & Muninn

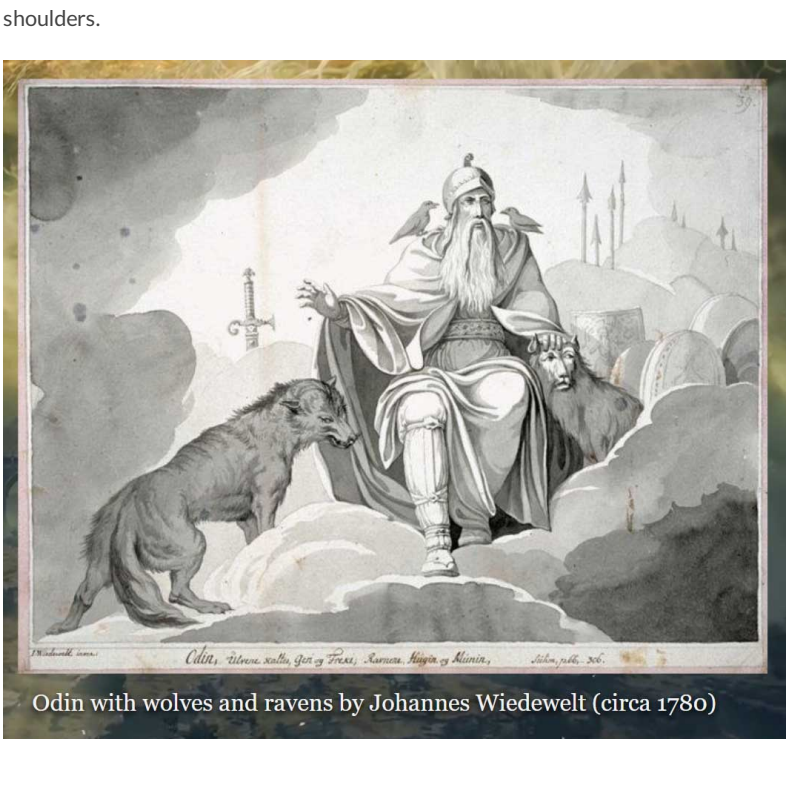
"Two ravens flew from Hnikar's shoulders,
Huginn to a hanged man,
Munnin on a corpse"

-Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, ed. Arnamagnaean Institute, Vol 3 (Copenhagen, 1841-57)
Source: "Pagan Words and Christian Meanings" by Richard North, 1991

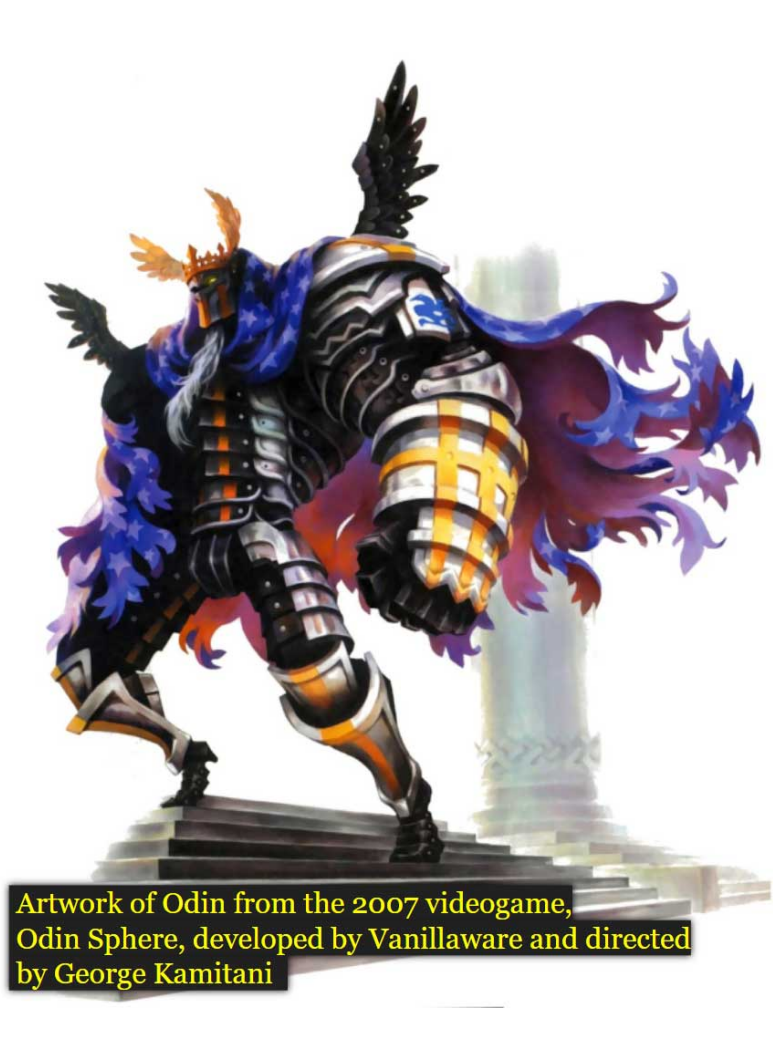
"Odin Enthroned" by Wilhelm Engelhard (1902)

They return to Odin by dinner time and inform him of all the important ongoings in Midgard.

In the Prose Edda, Odin is referred to as Hrafnaguð, which means "raven god." In traditional art he's often depicted with Huginn and Muninn perched on his shoulders.



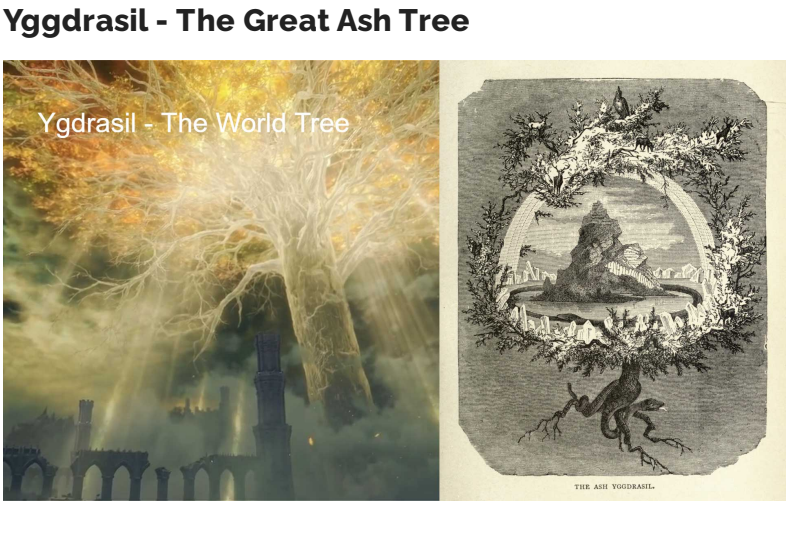
Odin with wolves and ravens by Johannes Wiedewelt (circa 1780)



Artwork of Odin from the 2007 videogame, Odin Sphere, developed by Vanillaware and directed by George Kamitani

That's fine and well, but how do I figure they're Norse ravens and not just regular ravens? That's cos they're clearly flying in front of an homage to Yggrasil, the famed world tree of Norse mythology!

Yggdrasil - The Great Ash Tree



According to the *Poetic Edda*, Yggrasil is a massive ash tree that supports the 9 realms of existence which span the entirety of the universe, from the worlds of the gods and giants, to the realm of the humans, and even the various realms of the afterlife!

It's widely accepted that "Yggdrasil" means "Odin's horse" wherein "Ygg" is one of Odin's many names and "Drasil" means "horse" as well as "gallows." Together these two words could be combined to mean **"the place where Odin hung himself."** This is because in Norse mythology, Odin hung himself from the great ash tree in order to unlock the secret of runes--which are sure to be an important part of the lore and gameplay of Elden Ring!

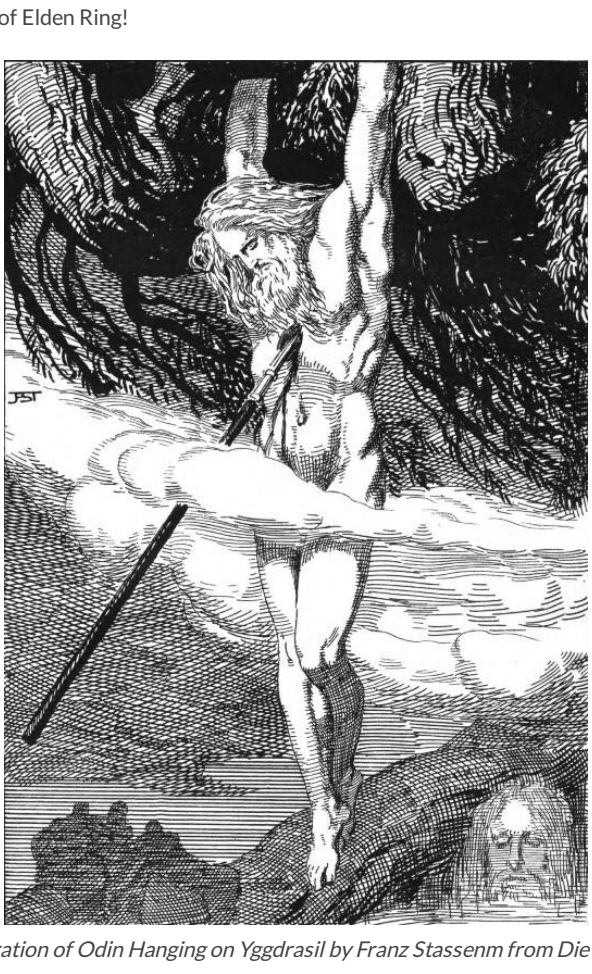
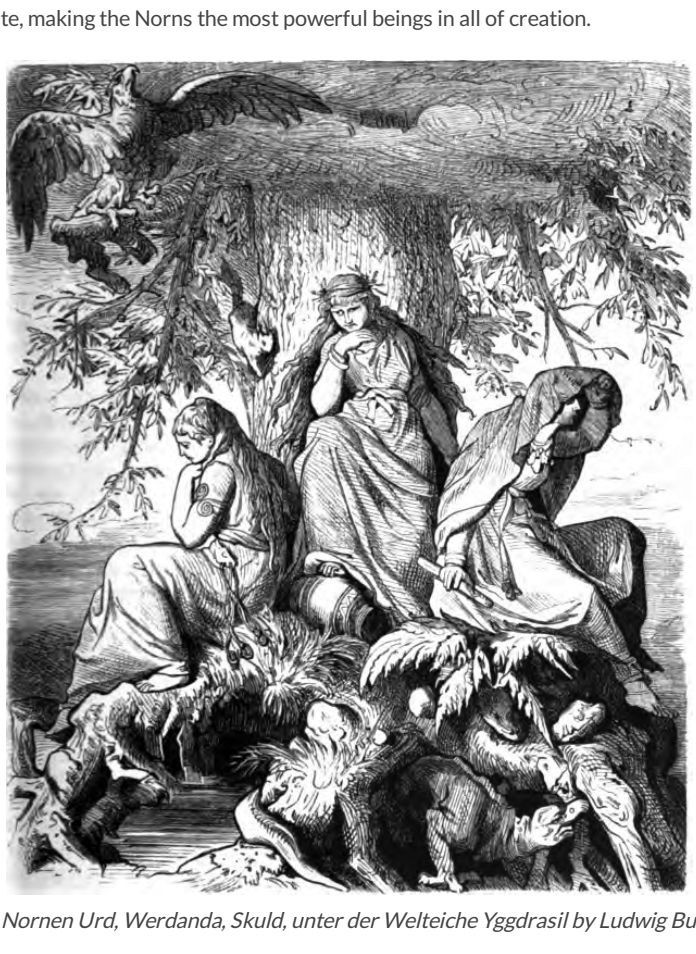


Illustration of Odin Hanging on Yggdrasil by Franz Stassenm from Die Edda: Germanische Götter- und Heldensagen by Hans von Wolzogen, published in 1920

It goes that at the base of Yggdrasil live the Norns, three Jotuns (giantesses) who attend to the tree and control the fate of all living things. Even the gods are subject to fate, making the Norns the most powerful beings in all of creation.



Die Nornen Urd, Werdanda, Skuld, unter der Welteiche Yggdrasil by Ludwig Burger

The norns are:

- Urd (the past)
- Verdani (the present)
- Skuld (what shall be)

OH! MY GODDESS
Kosuke Fujishima
2

I'm sure many of you reading this are already well acquainted with The Norns!

The Norns are able to use magic runes to bend reality to their will. Odin, who is always searching for knowledge, longs for this power. He learns that the runes only present themselves to those that are worthy, so he offers up his own life by piercing his body with his spear and hanging himself from the World Tree and forbidding the other gods to render aid.

Here is a translation of the sequence from The Hovamol that describes this momentous ocassion:

> *I ween that I hung | on the windy tree,*
> *Hung there for nights full nine;*
> *With the spear I was wounded, | and offered I was*
> *To Othin, myself to myself,*
> *On the tree that none | may ever know*
> *What root beneath it runs.*
>
> None made me happy | with loaf or horn,
> And there below I looked;
> I took up the runes, | shrieking I took them,
> And forthwith back I fell.
>
> ***Hovamol 139-165***
> ***Translated by Henry Adams Bellows***

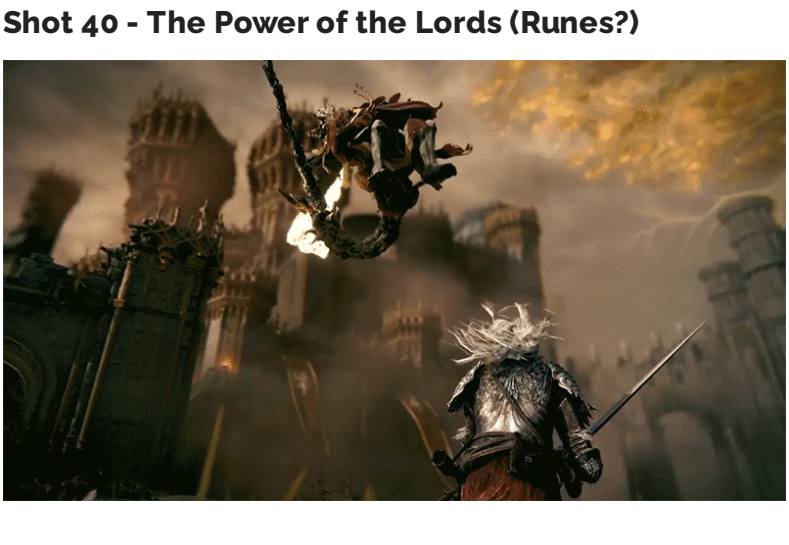
source:
sacred-texts.com/neu/poe/poe04.htm

On the 9th day of this ordeal, the runes reveal themselves to him, giving him the power to:

- Heal wounds
- Bind and defeat enemies
- Get out of constraints
- Put out fires
- Raise the dead!

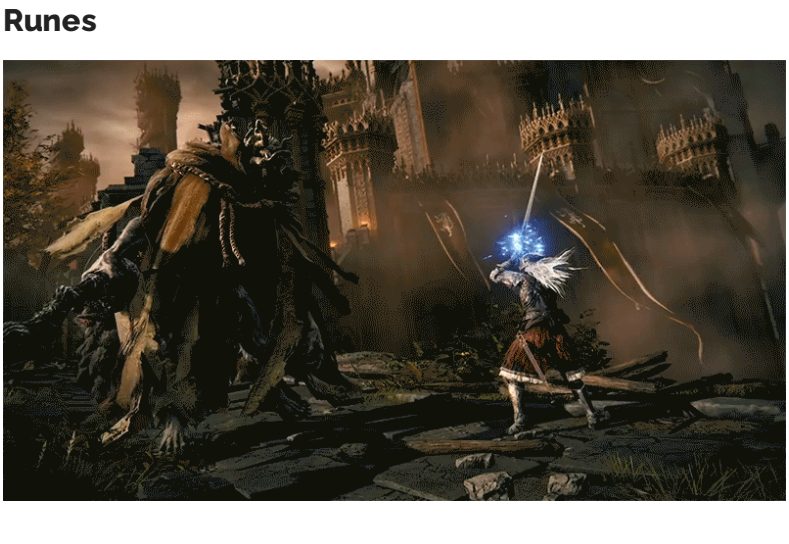
This is very relevant to Elden Ring, as you'll see later in this trailer, much of the gameplay will revolve around powering up your character with runes.

Shot 40 - The Power of the Lords (Runes?)

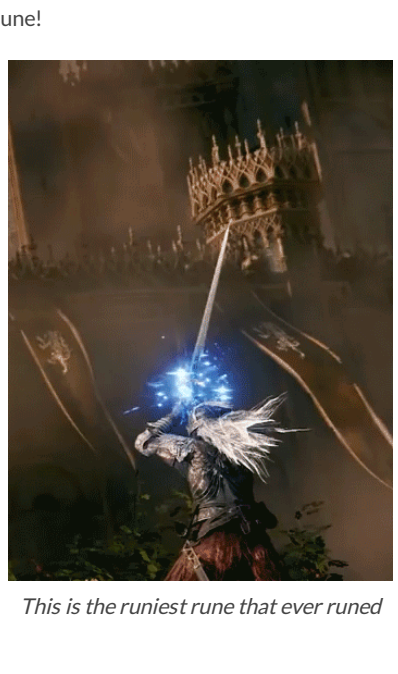


I'm now going to jump ahead quite a bit in the trailer to shot 40. At this point the player character is fighting a powerful boss (presumably a "Lord") who can materialize weapons out of thin air.

Shot 41 - The Hero Retaliates With The Power of Runes



The player character then counters by powering up their own sword, using what looks like a glowing rune!

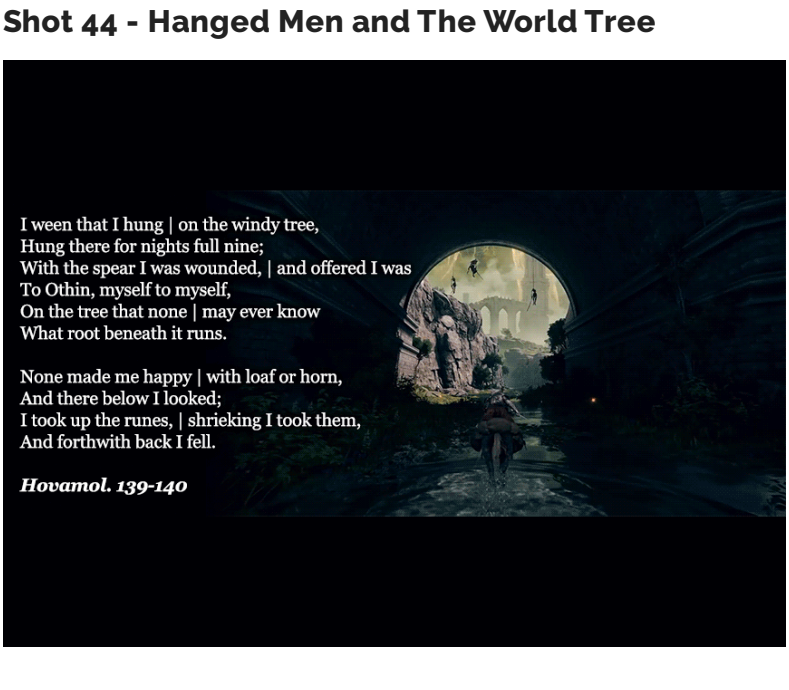


This is the runiest rune that ever runed

Shot 43 - They Will Fight

Right after this shot we hear a voice saying "they will fight... and they will die."

Shot 44 - Hanged Men and The World Tree



I ween that I hung | on the windy tree,
Hung there for nights full nine;
With the spear I was wounded, | and offered I was
To Othin, myself to myself,
On the tree that none | may ever know
What root beneath it runs.

None made me happy | with loaf or horn,
And there below I looked;
I took up the runes, | shrieking I took them,
And forthwith back I fell.

Hovamol. 139-140

As the words, "they will die" are spoken, the trailer cuts to an image of hanged men dangling in front of the world tree. I think that's as clear of a mythic allusion as we can expect from Elden Ring. The ravens, the world tree, and specifically the image of hanged men in front of the world tree after a demonstration of the power of runes.

I LOVE stuff like this! It works as compelling imagery on its own, but if you're familiar with the mythic allusions it hits even harder! It's subtle, but it hammers you over the head if you know what to look out for!

That's it for part 1 of this (long long overdue) trailer analysis. Tune in next time as we dive into how this trailer reveals the theme of class struggle in Elden Ring! And we're not done with the Norse references either!

If you've made it this far, thank you for taking the time to read through all this! What did you think? Do the references to Norse Mythology seem clear to you? Or is it just a coincidence? Either way, I hope you enjoyed the history lesson here.

Please let me know your thoughts on Twitter (this will serve as the comments section for this article):
twitter.com/Richmond_Lee/status/1513987804895797273

OH MY GOODNESS. It feels so good to finally get this out there! I feel a great weight (well part of it) lifted from my shoulders! This article has been hanging over me for nearly a year! I learned a lot while researching it though, so no regrets! It was very educational for me, I hope it was for you too!

If you're a Patron of Art-Eater then you may have already read the WIP version of this article months ago. All the basic points were worked out shortly after the release of the original trailer. But then I just kept finding more and more interesting information to include! Scope creep is a helluvathing! Especially when it comes to personal work like this!

I also went over most of this information on the Art-Eater Podcast, which you can listen to here:
art-eater.com/podcasts/49-elden-ring-norse-mythology-class-struggle-forgiveness

Thanks so much for your time! Ahhhh I feel so much better finally getting this out of my system! HAVE A GOOD ONE!

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